

The *Popularis* Stage: Caesar's Portrayal of the *Contio*

As prominent as the debate has been concerning the role of *contiones* in party politics of the late republic, little to no attention has been given to Caesar's treatment of *contiones* in his writings.¹ In both the *De Bello Civili* and *De Bello Gallico*, the few occurrences of *contiones* reveal critical information about who Caesar saw as the rightful group of magistrates to truly represent the masses. How Caesar viewed the role of *contiones* sheds new light on the scholarly argument about the prominence of this political method in the late Republic and on which political party viewed the *contio* as solely their arena.

Caesar's works were read as official addresses in front of his senatorial colleagues, and it was necessary "in order that he might defend himself against the insults of his enemies (*uti se a contumelis, inimicorum defenderet*, *Caes. B Civ.* 1.22)" for him to demonstrate the validity of his war in Gaul and his attack on the Senate.² Caesar's word choice and his comments on the political happenings in Rome during his absence become all the more important when read in front of his competitors and allies.

The word *contio* is used only twice in the entire *De Bello Gallico* and only for speeches given by Caesar to his troops. Caesar uses another term when referring to a meeting between Caesar and Gauls or Germans, or Germans and Gauls speaking to their own troops. In the first *contio*, taking place in book five after Cotta and Sabinus (two of Caesar's legates) had been killed, he makes sure to avoid any direct blame of his men by putting the fault on a legate. The second *contio* occurs in book seven following the plundering of Gergovia against Caesar's

¹For a broad definition of the *contio* see Henrik Mouritsen, *Plebs and Politics in the Late Republic* (2006). For a discussion of the Roman Republic as a democratic system see Fergus Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (1998). See Robert Morstein-Marx, *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* (2005) for the role of the *contio* in the client patron relationships of the late Republic. For the *contio* as a purely *popularis* political tool see James Tan, "Contiones in the Age of Cicero," *Classical Antiquity* 27, no. 1 (2008).

²See Henderson (1998) for the outline of the argument that Caesar's writings were to be read as official addresses to his colleagues in the Senate.

orders. In contrast to the first *contio*, Caesar does not shy away from scolding his men, although he ends the speech by praising their former glories. By both praising his troops and stressing the need for a powerful leader, these speeches demonstrate the proper way to court the masses as well as the type of popular government that Caesar favors.

There are six *contiones* in the *De Bello Civili* that vary greatly from those in the *De Bello Gallico* because of the charged political nature of the work. Caesar consistently portrays *contiones* called by *optimates* negatively and those by *populares* positively.³ Although all of these speeches contain the same rhetoric, two of the pairs demonstrate this with direct ties to the political happenings in Rome. The first pair, the first and last of these speeches found in the work, are given by Domitius Ahenobarbus and Caesar following military setbacks (Caes. *B Civ.* 1.17; 3.73). Domitius attempts to calm his troops through bribery, and Caesar, on the contrary, placates his men with uplifting language. Taken in the context of widespread electoral bribery, the commander attempting to win over his men stands in for a magistrate who wishes to win over the crowd. The second pair deals with loyalty to one's commander and the uprightness of his cause (Caes. *B Civ.* 1.30; 2.18). Cato blames Pompey for his situation in Sicily, while Curio shows loyalty to Caesar after being outmanned and undersupplied in Africa. By demonstrating the loyalty of his own supporters through the positive language of Curio's *contio*, Caesar again shows how to correctly use a *contio* and how the *populares* govern.

In all of these speeches, Caesar undoubtedly reveals to his senatorial colleagues how he views the role of the masses and the style of governance he prefers. By showing that the *contio* was a stage for only *populares*, he makes it clear that they are the only ones who can truly speak for the people. Through the character Caesar, Caesar the author, general and politician

³ Caes., *De Bello Civili*, 1.17, 30; 2.18, 21; 3.10, 73

unequivocally shows to all those back at Rome that it was the *populares* who had the right to garner the support of the urban populace, and that the governance of the Roman state would combine the power of the people with his ability to lead.

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